[Lomonosov Moscow State University](http://www.msu.ru/en/" \t "_blank)

Department of Linguistics and IT

Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies

**Distance course « The World of Britain»**

**FINAL PROJECT**

**British Humour vs. Russian Humour**

Author: Anna Ermakova

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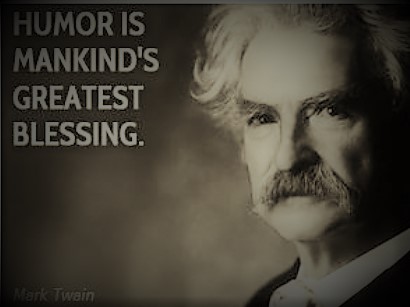
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**INTRODUCTION**



Actuality of topics, connected with humour, like wonders, will never cease!

You hear the word humour a lot. People talk about office humour, sense of humour, a guy named Hugh Moore and about national humour.

[Humour](http://www.lexiophiles.com/topic/humor) is a phenomenon which is influenced by culture. It can be difficult to determine what aspects define a certain sense of humour. A nation’s wit is linked to the historical development of the country. How funny somebody finds a certain incident depends on many factors including age, personal experience, level of education and geographical location. Therefore humour is something which is not always transferrable in another country. What somebody from one area may find hilarious may not be amusing at all to somebody from another location. Whether or not someone gets a joke is determined by their interpretation, filtered by the cultural context.

The main questions of this research paper are the following:

* Where does humour stem from in any culture?
* What are the peculiar features of British and Russian humour?
* What do they have in common?

*«Analyzing humour is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested, and the frog dies of it»*

*Elwyn Brooks White*

**I WHAT IS HUMOUR**

Let’s keep it in mind what Elwyn Brooks White said and try to analyze humour in a gentle way in order to minimize the harm.

**The origin of the word 'humour'**

Humour is a Latin word meaning liquid, fluid or moisture. According to ancient Greek theory the body of man comprises of four humourous, or liquids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile (Smith, 1912:113).A humourist is a person who was said to possess and excess of one of the fluids. ***The remedy for bad temperament caused excessive humourous was thought to be laughter*** (Ibid).

The word humour, as defined by Random House Dictionary, means

**a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement**

To better understand what humour is, let’s look at two other words most people relate to humour–comedy and jokes.  The House of Random says comedy is

**any comic or humourous incident or series of incidents**

And a joke is - **something said or done to provoke laughter or cause amusement**

the relationship of humour, comedy and jokes is like: all jokes are comedy, and all comedy is humour, but not all humour is comedy and certainly not all jokes.

Most people think of humour as something that exists for the sake of entertainment, or for adding spice to social occasions.

But humour is an aspect of the human mind, and as such, is almost certainly part of a system for information processing. So what sort of information is being processed when we laugh at something funny?

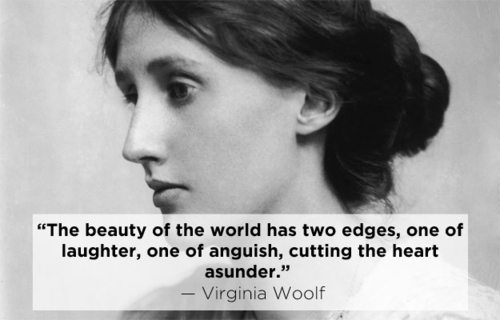
Most humour **follows a pattern** like this:

* First we think that something is true, based on clues given to us,
* But then we are presented with further evidence, which shows that we were wrong,
* In fact we were so wrong, that there was something wrong with the thought processes that lead to the initial conclusion.

And at the end of this process, we feel pleasure.

Most people are uncomfortable in situations that cause them to question the fundamental beliefs that they have about the world around them. If evidence seems to contradict that fundamental belief system, they will prefer to ignore the evidence rather than change their beliefs. They prefer not to consider even the possibility that they may be wrong.

If someone lacked a sense of humour, we would expect that person to have difficulty abandoning their existing belief systems, even when presented with very strong evidence against them.



**II SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF HUMOUR**

All jokes are expressive of the social situation in which they occur. Each culture has its own special risks and problems. There are many jokes in which only the constituents of the same society can experience humour. For example, the jokes which farmers exchange among themselves may sound very funny to them, but they do not sound funny to educate the men. This reflects the fact that what is funny among men of an unintelligent society is not funny among men of an intellectual society

Thus one should understand the cultural and social facts and the shared believes and attitudes in order to grasp the essence of the joke. “Culture can be defined as the total range of activities and ideas and their material expression in objects”. A ”joke” can be defined as a form of humour in which the funniness culminates in the final sentence ,called the bunchline. Jokes can be analyzed into: the setting of the scene and the punchline.

Jokes, as popular communication, serve to affirm and perpetuate a cultural identity among people in different physical locations. Hence, Cultural jokes are ones that are related to a specific nation. They may be related to conflicts between the values, beliefs and attitudes found in the culture. Accordingly, we can agree with Waters who says," it's not the jokes. It's what lies behind them; It’s attitude"

**III. THE MAIN COGNITIVE AND PSCHYCOLOGICAL MECHANISMS THAT DEFINE BOTH RUSSIAN AND BRITISH HUMOUR**

**The incongruity theory**

The context for humour is crucial for determining whether an individual finds something amusing or not. Even so, it is possible to examine the features of language that have the potential to make people laugh. The incongruity theory focuses on the element of surprise. It states that humour is created out of a conf lict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke. This accounts for the most obvious feature of much humour: an ambiguity, or double meaning, which deliberately misleads the audience, followed by a punchline.

‘Do you believe in clubs for young people?’ ‘Only when kindness fails.’

(W.C.Fields)

It is reasonable to understand the word ‘clubs’ in the sense of ‘leisure groups’, but the punchline shows that it was referring to ‘weapons’.

In such small examples of humour the term incongruity refers to the possibility for two meanings being understood from the utterance. This is often called a pun. The humour will often have the following elements:

There is a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke. • The conf lict is caused by an ambiguity at some level of language. • The punchline is surprising, as it is not the expected interpretation, but it resolves the conf lict: ‘Have you got a light, Mac?’ ‘No, but I’ve got a dark brown overcoat.’

**Structural ambiguity**

This can occur in the British language at various levels:

• **phonology**—the sounds that make up the language

**• graphology**—the way the language is represented in written form

**• morphology**—the way words themselves are structured

• **lexis**—the individual words of the language

**• syntax**—the way the words are structured into phrases, clauses and sentences.

In the joke quoted above, there is an ambiguity at the level of lexis and phonology, as there are two possible meanings for each of the words ‘light’ and ‘Mac/mac’. There is also an ambiguity in syntax: the listener interprets the structure as finishing on the noun ‘light’, with the name of the person added on.

**Allusion, context and parody**

The corniness of such jokes is emphasised because the wordplay is clumsy and laboured, yet, perversely, this is what makes the audience laugh. You have to perceive the joke in these ways: understand the wordplay; consider such wordplay unfunny; and appreciate its occurrence in a new context.

**The superiority theory**

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes (author of Leviathan, 1651) characterised laughter as a ‘sudden glory’ at a triumph of our own or at an indignity suffered by someone else. This could explain why people laugh at the many variations of the slipping-on-a-banana-skin scenario; there’s an urge to laugh at the (literal) downfall of another. Hobbes claimed that those who laugh are momentarily released from awareness of their own lack of ability. This accords with a commonsense perception of much humour being a form of mockery—a way of attacking others, so maintaining power and status by gaining support from others who join in the laughter. People most likely to laugh, according to Hobbes, are those ‘that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men.’

**Less powerful groups as the butt of humour**

The term butt comes from Old French, originally referring to a mound behind a target. It is now used in a metaphorical sense meaning an object of ridicule and is used in phrases such as ‘the butt of his jokes’.

There have been so many jokes about mothers-in-law in recent British humour that they are referred to as a type: ‘mother-in-law jokes’; similarly with ‘Irish’ jokes. This is the same for Russian humour with the difference that instead of Irish jokes we can refer to “Chukcha” or “Ukraine” jokes.

In many examples of humour the butt is a representative of a group perceived as inferior in some sense, so it might seem unnecessary to create a sense of superiority over them.

**Powerful groups as the butt of humour**

Much humour is an attack on people in superior positions of power and inf luence; in a sense, it is the fight-back of the victim, who has only words to use against money, might and status.

**Attractiveness of taboo subjects**

It is almost certain that the most common topics are still sex and excreta. This taboo seems to be universal. Children’s jokes break the taboo of referring to bodily functions, but with an element of disguise. This tendency does not disappear with age.

In Seriously Funny (Jacobson 1997) Howard Jacobson emphasises the origins of laughter in the ancient roots of civilisation, when we were closer to our animal nature. He claims that we laugh at slapstick comedy because the buckets of water and custard pies remind us of urine and faeces. Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary critic, traced this tradition from the Greek satyr plays which originated in the phallic songs and dances for the worship of Dionysus. Even at the height of Athenian civilisation the performance of a great tragedy, like Oedipus, alway ended with a rude comedy involving satyrs—the mythical creatures, half-human, half-animal, notorious for their genital endowment and insatiable sexual appetite.

One factor which influences the audience response is the use of euphemisms or innuendos, rather than explicit language or taboo words.

Once a particular object has sexual connotations, that word can be enough to trigger the laugh: ‘bananas’, ‘cucumbers’. A word or phrase may have a double meaning. Some words, like ‘balls’, are polysemes, and the homophone ‘pear/pair’ creates a number of corny gags à la Benny Hill: ‘What a lovely pear.’ The teller can then blame the tellee for ‘having a dirty mind’.

**Death Taboo**

This does not mean that it can not be mentioned at all but that there are restrictions—one is the use of respectful or euphemistic terms. Humour on the topic of death also ranges from the generally acceptable to the shocking and offensive. The following witticisms are based on the ability to find humour in references to our own mortality and involve an allusion to a well-known saying, which is turned around in some way.

Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may diet. The trouble with life in the fast lane is that you get to the other end in an awful hurry.

**Religion Taboo**

Religion is the third taboo area to be examined. There is still a blasphemy law in Britain—it can be a crime to make offensive references to the Christian religion. The latest accident with a Russian guy who had chased pokemones, playing a notorious game, in the church and then got under arrest depicts the fact that offensive references to the Orthodox religious are prohibited by law.

**IV PECULIARITIES OF RUSSIAN HUMOUR**

I am a strong believer that Russian people have a great sense of humour. If we were to try to see the difference between let's say British and Russian humour, the main thing is that Russians are more open while expressing themselves. Russian humour may not be as dry as British humour. We will eagerly laugh at our own social problems and other uncomfortable things like government. I would say that our humour is more kind, less harsh than British.

For me, one of the most outrageous symbols of our humour are late Soviet era films, that are well-known for their optimistic and funny plots, hilarious jokes, brilliant work of comedians and directors of pictures.

One of the most famous films is "Ivan Vasilievich Changes His Profession" a comical fantasy about modern society and the times of Ivan the Terrible. While watching this masterpiece you will undoubtedly learn much about good Russian traditions and of course, food and drinks. The film is full of great jokes, which are beloved by the population to this day. You'll still hear references to this and other movies even more than 30 years after their original releases.



I have to admit that one of the most popular form of humour is anekdot - joke story with a punchline.

Typical of Russian joke culture is a series of categories with fixed and highly familiar settings and characters. Surprising effects are achieved by an endless variety of plots and plays on words. The most common themes of Russian anecdotes are the following:

**Works of Fiction**

Vasily Ivanovich Chapayev. He was a Red Army hero of the Russian Civil War, in the rank of Division Commander. Other characters from the biopic like his attendant Petka, Anka were also featured in the jokes. Most common topics are about their fight with the White Army.

- Vasiliy Ivanovich, enemy tanks are attacking!  
- Take the grenades from the shelf, Petka.  
Some time later.  
- Whew! We've beaten them back!  
- Good, Petka. Now, put the grenades back to the shelf.

**Lieutenant Rzhevsky**, a Hussar from the popular movie Hussar Ballad. He is renowned for being a womanizer, telling lewd jokes. By some weird reason (maybe for sheer contrast), these jokes usually depict him interacting with characters from War and Peace such as Natasha Rostova or Pierre Bezukhov.

"Yesterday I saved a lady from a rape..."  
"Oh, it's so interesting, Lieutenant, tell me how you did it!"  
"Well, I just persuaded her."

**Sherlock Hlmes and Dr. Watson**, mostly based upon their portrayal by Vasiliy Livanov and Vitaly Solomin in film adaptation of Conan Doyle's works. The content centered on Holmes' improbable ingenuity in deduction, and Watson acting as straight man. Another prominent theme is making fun of Victorian British stereotypes.

**Watson**: Holmes, what is this terrible howling? Is this the Hound of Baskervilles?  
**Holmes**: No, Watson... It's Sir Henry, they're trying to make him eat porridge again.

And the last but not the least, for me one of the greatest comedian actors that symbolize Russian humour culture is **Yuri Nikulin** – warm-hearted, sincere and childish in a pure way.

 Some funny quotes from Comedies where Yuri Nikulin acted:

[I haven't yet seen a husband who didn't want to become a bachelor just for an hour...](http://wise-quote.com/Yuri-Nikulin-4426)

[Sometimes, having posponed something for tomorrow, you are horrified to think that tomorrow comes in few hours.](http://wise-quote.com/Yuri-Nikulin-4428)

[Never avenge mean people. Just become happy. They won't survive this.](http://wise-quote.com/Yuri-Nikulin-4427) [Strike the iron without walking away from the cash register.](http://wise-quote.com/Yuri-Nikulin-4425)

**V. PECULARITIES OF BRITISH HUMOUR**

Kate Foх, the author of «watching the English» thinks that **«**in English conversation, there is always an undercurrent of humour. We can barely manage to say ‘hello’ or comment on the weather without somehow contriving to make a bit of a joke out of it, and most British conversations will involve at least some degree of banter, teasing, irony, understatement, humourous self-deprecation, mockery or just silliness. Humour is our ‘default mode’, if you like: we do not have to switch it on deliberately, and we cannot switch it off.»

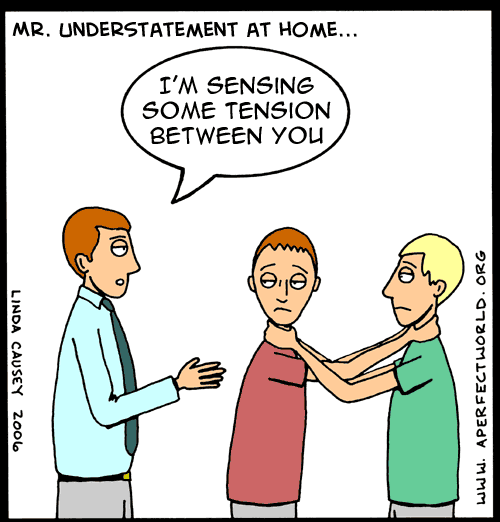
She came up with several rules that truly depict British humour.

**Irony Rules**

The British, according to an acute observer of the minutiae of Britishness, are ‘conceived in irony. They float in it from the womb. It’s the amniotic fluid . . . Joking but not joking. Caring but not caring. Serious but not serious.’ The problem with the British is that you never know when they are joking – you never know whether they are being serious or not.

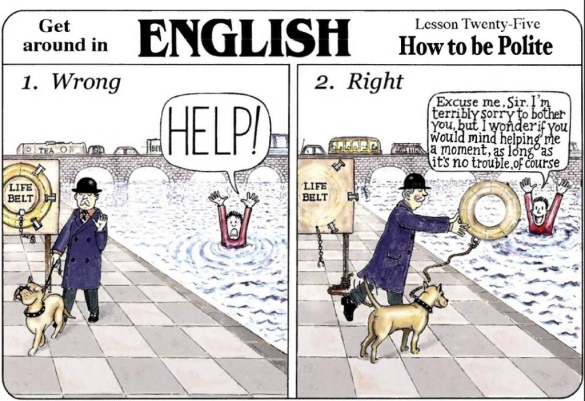
**The importance of not being earnest rule**

At the most basic level, an underlying rule in all British conversation is the proscription of ‘earnestness’. Although we may not have a monopoly on humour, or even on irony, the British are probably more acutely sensitive than any other nation to the distinction between ‘serious’ and ‘solemn’, between ‘sincerity’ and ‘earnestness’.



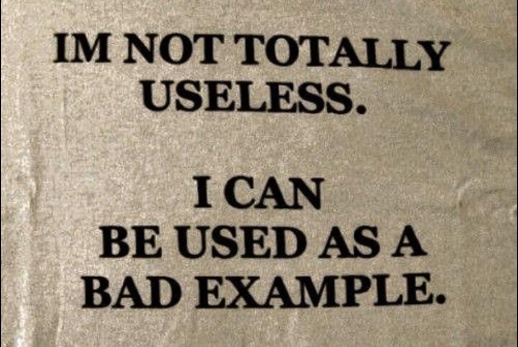
**The understatement rule**

Understatement is a form of irony, rather than a distinct and separate type of humour. It is also a very British kind of irony – the understatement rule is a close cousin of the Importance of Not Being Earnest rule, and the various reserve and modesty rules



**The Self-deprecation Rule**

Like the British understatement, British self-deprecation can be seen as a form of irony. It usually involves not genuine modesty but saying the opposite of what they really mean – or at least the opposite of what they intend people to understand. And therein lies the humour. Again, we are not talking about obvious, thigh-slapping funniness: the humour of British self-deprecation, like that of the British understatement, is understated, often to the point of being almost imperceptible – and bordering on incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with British modesty rules.



**Humour and class**

‘Guiding principles’ of British humour are classless. The taboo on earnestness, and the rules of irony, understatement and self-deprecation transcend all class barriers. No social rule is ever universally obeyed, but among the British these humour rules are universally (albeit subconsciously) understood and accepted. Whatever the class context, breaches are noticed, frowned upon and ridiculed. The rules of British humour may be classless, but it must be said that a great deal of everyday British humour is preoccupied with class issues.

«For the British, the rules of humour are the cultural equivalent of natural laws – we obey them automatically, rather in the way that we obey the law of gravity» - says Kate Fox in her research book.

**CONCLUSION**

Humour is one of the most defining aspects of humanity. It is an integral part of everyday communication and an important component of so many literary works, films, art and mass entertainment. Sometimes, when trying to translate cultural humour, opaque elements and language-specific devices are expected to make the translator's work difficult, while some elements are ultimately not transferred at all. Undoubtedly there is a certain uniqueness in humour due to specialty of national language and culture. But if we dig into pshycological, linguistic and cognitive components of theories that define humour we can see that the main rules comprise almost similar basement for it no matter what country does it come from.

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